

**REGIONALIZED FIRE SERVICE: IS IT RIGHT FOR YPSILANTI TOWNSHIP?**  
**EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP**

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### **CERTIFICATION STATEMENT**

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABSTRACT**

In today's difficult financial times, municipalities must find methods of getting more from their taxpayers' dollars. The ability to provide safe and effective service with decreasing funding is a problem. This project used descriptive research in attempting to find solutions to this problem.

The research questions answered were:

1. What is regionalized or consolidated fire service?
2. How will regionalized service affect the emergency response in the communities involved?
3. What are the steps necessary to implement this type of service?
4. What obstacles are there to regionalized service?

In considering fire services, a regionalized approach is often the preferred method of improving service. There are obstacles to overcome in this approach. Consideration must be given to differences between the departments' levels of service, union contracts, and staffing methods and levels. The need for a central dispatch and common operating frequencies is paramount. The perceived need for each municipality to control the fire department is another obstacle to regionalizing fire department service. Political obstacles can be many and must be overcome.

Planning and communication is essential to overcome many of these obstacles. Fair and equitable funding between the involved organizations is important. The need to obtain buy in of elected officials, the public, unions, and fire department management is essential to the process.

Mutual aid agreements may be considered the first step to regionalizing services.

Washtenaw County fire departments use an efficient and effective mutual aid system.

This system could be expanded to provide regionalized services to the area.

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## INTRODUCTION

Municipalities face many different situations every day. These situations include emergency responses, as well as routine or non-emergency actions. Planning for these situations is important for municipalities to function safely, effectively, and efficiently.

Fire departments and other emergency responders are called on for all types of emergency situations. This goes well beyond the traditional fire response and often includes response to medical emergencies, hazardous materials response, and natural disasters. Responding to some emergencies requires special knowledge and/or training to enable fire personnel to handle the situations.

The problem is being able to provide emergency services at a level of safe operation for both responders and citizens. The level of safety may not always be the same for the fire department as expected by the community or recommended by existing standards. Financial aid from state and/or federal government including but not limited to resources and funding reimbursement is shrinking or disappearing.

Descriptive research will be used for the research project to determine the significance and feasibility of regionalizing fire service protection in the Ypsilanti area. The research methodology includes literature research, interviews, and the use of a survey. The survey was sent to elected officials, fire chiefs, and union officials for the municipalities involved.

This paper relates to two of the United States Fire Administration's Operational goals. These are "Reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters" and "To promote within communities a comprehensive, multi-hazard risk-reduction plan led by the fire service organization."

Research questions to be answered are:

5. What is regionalized or consolidated fire service?
6. How will regionalized service affect the emergency response in the communities involved?
7. What are the steps necessary to implement this type of service?
8. What obstacles are there to regionalized service?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The fire service has traditionally been a “can do, we can handle it” type of organization. As communities grow, they expect more from their fire department. Fire departments have moved beyond responding only to fires, and now respond to medical emergencies, hazardous materials incidents, and other types of emergency and non-emergency situations.

As the demand for services increases, fire departments may have their budgets reduced, or not keep pace with the growth in the community. The community expects the levels of service to meet the needs of that community, and reduced funding may reduce service to the community. In communities that are built out, this problem may be compounded or have more profound impacts.

The Charter Township of Ypsilanti is the second largest (by population) in Washtenaw County. It borders Wayne County to the east, and essentially surrounds the City of Ypsilanti. Ypsilanti Township covers approximately 31.5 square miles, with an approximate population of 52,840 according to Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG). They estimate the Township population year to top out at 70,000 in the next five to ten years.

Ypsilanti Township Fire Department (YTFD) has a dedicated millage that is voted on every four years. In February 2005, voters reduced the millage rate for the Fire Department by 0.5 mils to 2.75 mils. This has caused a reduction in the amount to be collected by approximately \$500,000. In 2006 the millage rate is projected to raise \$4.3 million, which is the amount budgeted for fiscal 2006.

Ypsilanti Township Fire Department has 36 full time personnel, 35 uniformed and one civilian. The department is staffed by a fire chief, fire marshal, clerk, and 33 operations personnel. There are eleven personnel on each of the three shifts, with one of those eleven assigned to dispatching duties and not available for emergency response. Currently, a minimum of eight personnel will be available to respond on any shift.

Personnel operate four engines, one rescue, one ladder, and several utility vehicles from three fire stations. YTFD has responded to approximately 3800 emergency incidents each of the last three years.

The department responds to emergency medical calls as first responders. All but one of the uniformed personnel are certified Emergency Medical Technicians. EMS transport is handled by Huron Valley Ambulance (HVA), a non-profit private provider. HVA provides fire dispatch service for nine fire departments in Washtenaw County. YTFD is considering options to allow HVA or another community to provide dispatch for the department to allow another person to respond.

Ypsilanti Township Fire Department is a member of two mutual aid groups, Washtenaw Area Mutual Aid Association (WAMAA) and Western Wayne County Mutual Aid Association. WAMAA has 14 fire departments covering five counties including Washtenaw, Wayne, Livingston, Lenawee, and Monroe. Western Wayne

Mutual Aid includes 23 departments from three counties including Wayne, Oakland, and Washtenaw. Both mutual aid groups have organized hazardous materials teams, and both are in the process of establishing technical rescue and fire investigation teams.

In late 2004, several communities formed the Washtenaw Urban Alliance. Municipalities participating in this Alliance include the cities of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, and the Townships of Ypsilanti, Pittsfield, Ann Arbor, Scio, and Superior. The Townships are those immediately adjacent to the cities. The purpose of this group is to consider regionalizing various services in the communities involved including fire, recreation, police, and other services. Currently, a fire service sub-committee is gathering information on future fire service needs for the Alliance.

This paper will relate to two of the United States Fire Administration's Operational goals. These are "Reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters" and "To promote within communities a comprehensive, multi-hazard risk-reduction plan led by the fire service organization."

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In considering the ability to regionalize fire and emergency service it is important to ensure that the meaning or definition is the same for all involved. Carter and Sumek (2002, pp. 67 -68) discuss cooperation between two or more agencies. The benefits of this cooperation should make for greater efficiency and effectiveness. They define four types of cooperation, "consolidation, functional consolidation, mutual aid, and automatic aid. Consolidation is the merging of two or more agencies; functional consolidation is the merging of a specific function, such as training of two or more agencies; mutual aid is an agreement between departments to respond when specific assistance is requested; and

automatic aid is having the closest unit automatically respond to a call regardless of political boundaries.”

Carter and Sumek (2002, p. 68) continue by citing examples of each of these types of fire service cooperation. Most of the examples have departments responding with no regard to political boundaries, and are representative of all areas of the country.

It is imperative for fire chiefs to consider safe and efficient service as well as the cost of providing those services. “The consolidation of several departments into a single entity may provide the most efficient and cost effective means of providing fire and emergency medical services” (USFA, 1999, p. 2-39).

Improving service to the communities involved may not save money, but provide better service for the same funding. “ It is important to remember that a consolidated system that allows your agency to offer better service for the same money is, in effect a cost saving” (Hagstrom, 1999, p.10)

Schaper (1998, p.63) states “Who benefits from maintaining the status quo? Surely not our customers – the tax paying citizens who use the service and pay the bills. Certainly not the personnel working on the street trying to make an inferior system operate functionally”. The fire departments involved in the potential regionalization may be able to handle the routine emergency, but can we handle an emergency slightly beyond routine, or the major incident?

“This trend in consolidation or regionalization of services can be seen not only in the merging of departments but in functionally consolidating specific activities such as 9-1-1 dispatching, training, and inspection services, equipment maintenance, purchasing and employee services – all of which can reduce costs

and provide a higher level of service due to the specialized personnel that are assembled when such a consolidation or merger occurs” (Bruegman, 1994, p. 43).

By combining personnel from several small departments, it may allow for safer response to emergencies, and the development of specialized teams. “The regionalization of services can often provide us with the competitive edge we need to maintain or enhance the service levels provided to our communities in the most cost effective manner” (Bruegman, 1994, p.44).

There are differing definitions for consolidation. Functional consolidation: individual fire departments still exist but share various functions such as training, inspections, or dispatch centers. Partial consolidation: Individual departments continue to exist with an arrangement to share certain responsibilities. An example is a fire station shared and staffed by departments protecting two jurisdictions.

Operational Consolidation: Fire departments with similar staffing levels responding to similar incidents combine into one fire department. Merger: A large fire department absorbs a smaller fire department to form one department. Mutual aid: departments provide reciprocal assistance to each other for incidents they are equipped to handle. Incidents may include fire, EMS, hazardous materials, technical rescue, and others. Mutual aid may be by request for specific response to incidents, or automatic to certain areas or specific structures. Mutual aid is the most common of the types of consolidation. (Thomas, 1994, p. 105)

The International Association of City/County Management Association defines five forms of consolidation. The administrative consolidation combines administration of the departments such as clerical and human resources, while maintaining separate

functions in operations and other areas. Functional consolidation combines operational functions such as dispatch or inspection, but not all functions.

Area consolidation uses joint operations in low response areas, and maintains separate operations in high response areas. A partial consolidation is combining fire and police administration. Operations may be combined with police and fire fighters providing public safety. Full consolidation combines all fire and police operations and administrations. All personnel, fire and police are cross trained and provide fire, law enforcement, and EMS services. (Granito, 2002, p. 114 – 115)

There are potential difficulties identified by ICMA to be considered when attempting consolidation:

- Wage differences between departments
- Union Contracts
- Different retirement systems
- Civil service versus non civil service
- Merger of administrative staffs
- Personal feelings
- Political differences/objections by elected officials to the change
- Operating policies and procedure differences
- Name changes for the departments involved
- Authority and responsibility shifts or change
- Stress
- Equipment differences
- Differing organizational philosophies

- Who will fill the fire chief position

While there may be difficulties in consolidation, there are also advantages to be considered. These include:

- Cost Savings
- Reduction of duplicated services
- Equipment standardization
- Better utilization of resources
- Hazardous materials response capabilities increased
- Improvement to ISO rating
- Central dispatching
- Improved and standardized training opportunities
- Improved response to the public
- Increase in personnel
- Increased area of service
- Increased numbers of personnel to provide services

These advantages and disadvantages depend on the communities involved, including the fire department. (Pittard, 1990, pp. 9-12)

VFIS suggests careful consideration be given to the fire departments and communities ability to be flexible and having a willingness to customize agreements to meet the needs of the public. Consolidations often create difficulties, and may result in increased cost and decreased service. Functional consolidation may be an alternative solution to these problems. This is due to the fact that each organization maintains its identity and remains autonomous while increasing efficiency.

Developing a new organization, with new rules and regulations, procedures, and differing equipment may present too many challenges to consolidation. During the early stages of consolidation, union bargaining agreements, personnel systems, hiring or civil service processes, cultural differences within the departments, differing tax bases, and the potential for loss of staffing positions must be considered. These issues if not addressed early in the process may signal failure. (Thomas, 1994, p. 11-12)

In consolidating two or more departments, it is unlikely that the unions will be equal in every way. Communities are not the same or equal, therefore inequities are normal. Often communities feel they are not being treated equally and often result in dissatisfaction with the consolidation agreement. It is important to anticipate these problems and work to cooperatively develop an agreement that results in equitable sharing of resources.

Often times a community will feel that its resources are being used more often than the others. It is important that the sharing of resources be as equitable as possible so none of the parties in the agreement feel cheated. The idea is for the consolidation to result in mutual benefits for all the parties involved.

The needs of each of the local areas involved must constantly be looked at and met. Planning and review of the details of the agreement is important, as well as striving for all parties to understand the agreement's details. It is important to do this from the start, if the agreement is to succeed. (Coleman, 2003, pp. 22 – 24)

Snook and Johnson (1997) identified the “big four” – turf, politics, power, and control as major hurdles to consolidation. Human nature makes us reluctant to change, and giving up ownership of a fire department is most difficult for employees, elected

officials, and often the public. It is imperative to be aware of any potential hidden agendas among the participants in the consolidation. They further state that identification of stakeholders with power in the existing organizations is important, as well as what is important to them. If they perceive a loss of power, they may attempt to sabotage the agreement. They recommend a well written agreement to address control issues.

It is important to thoroughly inventory each organization including but not limited to department administration, human resources, fiscal information, training, and fire prevention. Consideration may be given to looking beyond the traditional delivery methods for public services in the development of a consolidation agreement. (Snook and Johnson, 1997).

This same inventory strategy, along with looking at areas that organizations may compliment each other should be part of the initial consolidation process. Each community should look at what it has to offer, and then compare them to the other organizations. It is often found that one organization's strengths may fill the voids in another and vice versa. However, these situations should not undermine the quality of service for any community involved. (Lemov, 1993)

Harvey (1993) discusses the fact that most local governments would rather be self producers for their services. However, in economically lean times it is often a fiscal necessity for municipalities to work together to provide services. This collaboration should allow for better, higher quality service to be given, at a reduced cost.

Harvey (1993) states that there are three factors or issues to be addressed by governments for successful collaborative agreements. These three factors are economic, social, and political. Economic deals with providing the same or an increased level of

service for the same or a reduced cost. Another economic reason may be the inability to provide the service by one of the governments. It may be necessary to expand the service area to make the collaboration cost effective. It is important for the cost of services to be transparent for each government to reduce any uncertainty in cost allocation, determine how cost will be shared, and should be clearly articulated in a written agreement.

Financing options for collaborated services include “general fund sources, property tax levy, special assessment, and user fees and charges.” (Harvey 1993, p 8)

Social factors or benefits include citizens getting services that might not otherwise be available, cost savings may be passed on to citizens, other services may be enhanced, and collaborative agreements may foster a spirit of cooperation and improve the political climate between the agreeing governments.

Harvey states that the political benefits to collaboration include new or improved service, specialized service(s) may be introduced, local officials are perceived as using tax dollars wisely, improves sense of community, and may foster good relationships between municipalities for other collaboration.

The survey was sent to elected officials, fire chiefs and officers, and union presidents for each of the departments. Twenty-two surveys were sent and replies were received from two elected officials, three fire chiefs or officers, and two union officials.

In defining the term “regionalized fire service” as it applies to provision of fire department services, elected officials considered the term generally to mean response without regard to political jurisdiction. Fire officers and union officials were split on the definition, some believed that it was departments sharing resources among close

proximity departments; one stated that it should be a county wide organization, and one stated that it should reduce cost and duplication of services.

In answering whether there is a difference between “regionalization” and “consolidation” of fire services, elected officials stated that consolidation was forming one department, while regionalization was an extension of mutual aid. The fire chiefs and union officials saw a difference between the consolidation and regionalization. Regionalization was being one county organization and consolidation being limited to a smaller area; another believed that regionalization was an extension of mutual aid, and consolidation is combining departments.

The potential obstacles to providing either regionalized or consolidated fire services were about the same for all responders. Responses included lack of equity in staffing and equipment between departments, who would lead the department, lack of central dispatch, turf battles, and union contract disparity. Fire and union officials also felt that elected officials might not want to give up control of their departments.

Elected officials stated that the first obstacle to overcome in either regionalization or consolidation of fire services was developing a single vision for the system. All groups talked about radio interoperability, and fire chiefs and union officials stated that loss of control by elected officials is the first obstacle to overcome.

Elected officials stated that the most difficult obstacle to overcome would be finding equitable tax or funding source for communities involved; and who should lead the organization. Fire officials considered central dispatch, politics, and staffing difference between communities to be most difficult.

The next question asked about consolidating some services but leaving others as they were. Services recommended for consolidation included dispatch, hazardous materials and technical rescue teams.

The seventh question asked about the logical steps needed to regionalize or consolidate fire services in the area. Responses from all three groups included buy in from elected officials, developing a central dispatch and radio interoperability, and development of a plan.

## **PROCEDURES**

In considering regionalized services, it is necessary for there to be an understanding as to what this means to the various individuals potentially involved in regionalized fire service. A literature review was conducted and a survey was distributed.

The literature review included studies of successful consolidated fire service organizations, articles from recognized experts, and information for differing types of consolidation. There is an abundance of information regarding fire consolidation, but little information using regionalization.

The survey was sent to key persons involved in the consideration of regionalized fire service, which included elected officials, fire chiefs and officers, and union officials. These individuals have either direct or indirect power or ability to influence the development of a regionalized fire service.

The survey asked questions about various definitions, obstacles to regionalized fire service, and steps necessary to consolidate fire service in the area. The survey is included in Appendix B. A cover letter was sent with the survey and is in Appendix A.

Results from the survey are in Appendix C. The survey should include as many of the parties in the communities to be directly involved as possible.

The need to include persons involved is important to get an understanding of the current levels of service, and potential obstacles whether real or perceived in undertaking consolidation of fire protection. The ability to get responses to the survey often proves difficult. Only one third of those sent a survey responded.

Expanding the survey to areas outside the Washtenaw County communities potentially considering regionalized fire protection was not undertaken. This was to keep the opinions and ideas pertinent to the surrounding area. The literature review provided ideas and opinions from outside the area.

## **RESULTS**

In considering the research questions, the survey and literature research gave similar answers. Survey answers were somewhat dependent on whether the responding person was an elected official, fire officer, or union official. In researching regionalized fire service, all literature was based on some form of consolidation. Most authors agreed there are several forms consolidation may take, from simple mutual aid to full consolidation of two or more departments. The results of the survey were fairly consistent with the findings of the literature review. Seven persons replied to the survey including two elected officials, three fire chiefs, and two union presidents.

The first question was, “What is regionalized or consolidated fire service?” The elected officials defined it as a centralized fire department including central dispatch. They agreed that would not regard political boundaries, allowing for response across the jurisdictions involved.

The fire officials considered cost reductions, sharing resources and facilities, central dispatch facilities, and improved interoperability as being regionalized fire service. One official stated that a regionalized fire service would be a county wide department, not just adjacent departments working together.

Most of the survey responses saw some differences between regionalization and consolidation. Generally, they saw regionalization as departments maintaining some identity, while consolidation was the merging of departments. Central dispatch is perceived as being necessary to departments working together.

The literature review revealed that regionalization and consolidation often had the same meaning and were used interchangeably. Carter and Sumek (2002, pp. 67 -68) discuss cooperation between two or more agencies that should make for greater efficiency and effectiveness of the overall organization. They define four types of cooperation, consolidation is the merging of two or more agencies; functional consolidation is the merging of a function or functions between agencies; mutual aid is an agreement between departments to respond to specific requests for aid; and in automatic aid the closest unit automatically responds regardless of political boundaries.

Bruegman, (1994, p. 43) states that consolidation or regionalization of services may deal with the merging of departments or in functional consolidation of activities. This may include functions such as dispatching, training, or inspection; and should reduce costs and provide a higher level of service.

Bruegman (1994, p.44) continues that merging several small departments may allow safer emergency response “The regionalization of services can often provide us

with the competitive edge we need to maintain or enhance the service levels provided to our communities in the most cost effective manner”

Thomas (1994, p. 105) defines consolidation in slightly different terms. Functional consolidation has individual fire departments existing but sharing functions. Partial consolidation is individual departments existing with an arrangement to share certain responsibilities. An example is a fire station shared and staffed by departments protecting two jurisdictions.

Fire departments with similar staffing levels responding to similar incidents combined into one fire department is operational consolidation. When a large fire department absorbs a smaller fire department to form one department it is a merger. Reciprocal assistance between fire departments for incidents that are beyond single department capability is mutual aid; these incidents may include fire, EMS, hazardous materials, technical rescue, and others. Mutual aid may be by request for specific response to incidents, or automatic to certain areas or specific structures. Mutual aid is the most common of the types of consolidation. (Thomas 1994, p. 105)

There are five definitions of consolidation given by the International Association of City/County Management Association (ICMA). Administrative consolidation combines administration of the departments such as clerical and human resources, but maintains separate functions in operations and other areas. Combining operational functions such as dispatch or inspection, but not all functions is functional consolidation.

Fire departments’ using joint operations in low response areas, while maintaining separate operations in high response areas is area consolidation. Combining fire and police administration is considered as partial consolidation by ICMA. Operations might

combined with police and fire fighters providing public safety. Full consolidation combines all fire and police operations and administrations. All fire and police personnel are cross-trained and provide fire, law enforcement, and EMS services. (Granito, 2002, p. 114 – 115)

The second question asked, “How will regionalized service affect the emergency response in the communities involved?”

The United States Fire Administration (USFA, 1999, p. 2-39) states “The consolidation of several departments into a single entity may provide the most efficient and cost effective means of providing fire and emergency medical services”. They further consider it imperative for fire chiefs to consider safe and efficient service as well as the cost of providing those services.

Hagstrom (1999, p.10) believes the same as USFA in saying that improving service to the communities involved may not save money, but provide better service of the same amount. He states “ It is important to remember that a consolidated system that allows your agency to offer better service for the same money is, in effect a cost saving”

Schaper (1998, p.63) states “Who benefits from maintaining the status quo? Surely not our customers – the tax paying citizens who use the service and pay the bills. Certainly not the personnel working on the street trying to make an inferior system operate functionally” The fire departments involved in the potential regionalization may be able to handle the routine emergency, but can we handle an emergency slightly beyond routine, or the major incident?

Bruegman (1994, p.43) states that consolidation or regionalization should not only be about merging fire departments but also consolidating functions in the separate

departments as a means of reducing service costs and/or providing a higher level of service for the same cost. This would be of great benefit for higher cost specialized service.

By combining personnel from several small departments, it may allow for safer response to emergencies, and development of specialized teams. “The regionalization of services can often provide us with the competitive edge we need to maintain or enhance the service levels provided to our communities in the most cost effective manner” (Bruegman, 1994, p.44)

Pittard (1990, pp. 9-12) believes the improvement due to consolidation include cost savings, reduction of duplicated services, equipment standardization, better utilization of resources, increased hazardous materials response capabilities and an improvement in the overall ISO rating. Other improved services might be central dispatching, standardized training opportunities, better response to the public, an increase in the number of responding personnel, and increase in the area of service. Improvements will depend on the communities involved, including the fire department(s).

Survey responders were of the opinion that any consolidation or regionalization should improve service or reduce cost. Some believe that a single tax rate was important, along with having equal response of personnel and apparatus from those involved. Most felt that the level of service should be consistent for all those involved. Currently, some departments respond to all medical incidents while others respond only to life threatening emergencies.

The third question deals with implementing consolidated or regionalized fire services, asking “What are the steps necessary to implement this type of service?” There

are many items to be considered in moving from single department response to regional or a consolidated fire department.

The survey respondents had several different approaches. The elected official looked to form committee, analyze information, and then write a plan to implement. Analysis should include of past calls, projected growth (residential and commercial), current locations of station, and resources available. Next would be developing a five year plan to include the division of power, command structure, financials, material and resources, and reporting structure.

The fire chiefs felt that buy in to the idea from political players, getting elected officials to give up control of their departments, and showing improved service to the participating organizations. This could include an upgraded radio system and a central dispatch center. They also felt that a study of existing fire departments, dispatch/communications, and how to combine similar departments would be logical.

Union officials wanted to include labor in all discussions regarding the consolidation/regionalization. They too felt that a plan would need to be developed to include all issues both pro and con, and a way to deal with them. Development of time line to implement the plan to allow for feedback on the issues, and give each organization the time needed to address any feedback.

Harvey (1993) states that economic, social, and political issues need to be addressed for successful collaborative agreements. Economic deals with an equal or increased level of service with no cost or cost reduction. Provision of a specific service or expansion of services may be necessary to improve cost effectiveness. Cost transparency is important for government to reduce any uncertainty in cost allocation and determine

how cost will be shared. This information should be clearly articulated in a written agreement. Financing options for consolidated services include “general fund sources, property tax levy, special assessment, and user fees and charges.” (Harvey 1993, p 8)

The last question asked was “What obstacles are there to regionalized service?” Consolidation depends on the municipalities involved agreeing on the level of service to be provided. It should improve response, or at least maintain response at an equal or reduced cost.

Thomas (1994, p.11-12) states that developing a new organization may present many challenges to consolidation, including new rules and regulations, procedures, and differing equipment. Union bargaining agreements, personnel systems, hiring or civil service processes, cultural differences within the departments, differing tax bases, and the potential for loss of staffing positions must be considered early in the process. Failure to do so could result in a breakdown in the process.

Coleman (2003, pp. 22 – 24) states that inequities are normal in consolidating departments. Communities, unions, and departments are not the same or equal, therefore some communities may feel they are not being treated equally. This will often result in dissatisfaction with the consolidation agreement. Anticipation of these problems and the work necessary to develop an agreement that results in equitable sharing of resources is important throughout the process.

Equality in sharing of resources is very important so none of the parties in the agreement feel cheated. Consolidation should result in mutual benefits for all the parties involved, and must consider the needs of each organization involved. This must be ongoing for the consolidation to be successful. Planning, understanding, and review of

the agreement are important if the agreement is going to succeed. (Coleman, 2003, pp. 22 – 24)

Snook and Johnson (1997) state that turf, politics, power, and control are major obstacles to consolidation. Reluctance to change is human nature. This makes it difficult to give up ownership of the fire department by the employees, elected officials, and the public. Hidden agendas among the participants in the consolidation can be an obstacle. It is important to identify stakeholders with power in the existing organizations, and what is important to them. They may attempt to sabotage the agreement if they perceive a loss of power. A well written agreement to address control issues is important.

A thorough inventory of each organization must be conducted including but not limited to the administration, human resources, fiscal, training, and fire prevention. Consideration may be given to looking beyond the traditional delivery methods for public services in the development of a consolidation agreement. (Snook and Johnson, 1997).

Consideration of areas where organizations may compliment each other, and compiling inventories of the departments should be part of the initial consolidation process. Comparing what each community or organization has to offer to the other organizations should be part of the initial process. Often one organization's strengths will fill the voids in another and vice versa. However, these situations should not undermine the quality of service for any community involved. (Lemov, 1993)

Harvey (1993) discusses the fact that most local governments would rather be self-producers for their services. However, in economically lean times it is often a fiscal necessity for municipalities to work together to provide services. This collaboration should provide higher quality service at a reduced cost.

Social factors or benefits include citizens getting services that might not otherwise be available. Other advantages include cost savings to citizens, other services enhanced, and collaborative agreements that foster a spirit of cooperation and improve the political climate between the agreeing governments.

Harvey states that the political benefits to collaboration include new or improved service, specialized service(s) may be introduced, local officials are perceived as using tax dollars wisely, improves sense of community, and may foster good relationships between municipalities for other collaboration.

Pittard (1990, pp. 9-12) states that wage differences between departments, union contracts, different retirement systems, civil service versus non civil service are some of the obstacles identified by ICMA. He also considered the merger of administrative staffs, operating policies, equipment differences, and organizational philosophies to hinder consolidation. If personal feelings, political differences between elected officials, who the fire chief will be, and the name for the new department are added to this, it may be difficult to even get started to develop consolidated fire service.

Survey responders stated that lack equity in staffing and equipment between departments, who would lead the department, lack of central dispatch, turf battles, and union contract disparity could be obstacles to regionalizing. Consistent with the literature research, fire and union officials felt that elected officials may not want to give up control of their departments.

Elected officials stated that the first obstacle to overcome in either regionalization or consolidation of fire services was developing a single vision for the system. All groups talked about radio interoperability. They also were concerned about finding an equitable

tax or funding source for communities involved, and who the leader of the organization would be.

Fire officials considered a lack of a central dispatch, politics, and staffing differences between communities to be the most difficult obstacles to overcome. The obstacles are the same and at the same time classic – turf, power, politics, control, and finances all come into play in either situation. Consolidation is much harder because someone will have to give up one of the items listed above. Regionalization, while still difficult, can provide some degree of division of the obstacles.

Some chiefs believe that cost equalization, and politicians not having control over the fire department were the most difficult obstacles. They stated that differences in union contracts, decreased services to outlying areas, turf battles, organizational differences, lack of central dispatch, different radio systems, non-standard equipment, training, and command and administration differences and personnel conflicts could be obstacles.

Union officials were concerned about the difference in retirement plans and in pay rates, fear of loss of jobs for firefighters, seniority issues for promotions and shift bidding, scheduling changes, and staffing levels on rigs as being a problem. They expressed concern over equipment relocation, differences in operations, training and culture, loss of control of fire department budgeting, and training differences between departments as a concern.

One theme for all responders was the lack of a central dispatch center, along with the fact that departments currently operate on different frequencies. Loss of control over each department was also a standard concern for all responders.

Although many saw obstacles, they also cited the fact that Washtenaw County fire departments are all active participants in the mutual aid system. All departments work together in responding to hazardous materials and other incidents. Expanding the current mutual aid system is seen as a possibility to going to regionalized fire services.

## **DISCUSSION**

Today's economic conditions demand that municipal governments consider different options to provide services in a cost effective manner. One of those options is sharing or consolidation of services provided. Consolidation is important to provide effective fire services, especially some of the specialized services such as hazardous materials response.

Washtenaw County through its mutual aid group, Washtenaw Area Mutual Aid Association (WAMAA) provides many specialized services including hazardous materials response. They are currently organizing technical rescue and fire investigation teams. This shows a spirit of cooperation that exists in the County at the fire chief and department level. This cooperation could be the forerunner of regionalized fire service in Washtenaw County.

Buy in from all parties involved in the regionalization or consolidation is imperative to have it to have a chance to be successful. It is evident from conversations with elected officials that they want to control their fire departments. As cities and townships face harder economic times, it may become easier to shift this attitude if the elected officials and public are shown that consolidation would be beneficial to all parties.

Control issues might be overcome by establishing a fire authority. This would allow each participating municipality to have a say in the fire department. The authority would have one or two representatives from each municipality on the board.

Benefits of regionalized fire protection should include improved service at a cost that remains as close to existing costs as possible. This may not always be possible due to a number of factors including differences in equipment, labor costs and contracts, department staffing methods (full time versus volunteer or paid on call or a combination of), and differing levels of service to the community.

If costs can stay fairly constant, it may be possible to regionalize. It may be necessary to begin with a modified plan to regionalize. This could be as simple as a plan for the closest department to respond regardless of political boundaries. This shows an enhanced need for a central dispatch center for Washtenaw County. Response by the closest department is more difficult if each department has its own dispatch center and calls for service must be transferred between centers. This increases response times, and actually worsens service.

The differences in union contracts may be another obstacle that could be worked out with some cooperation between management and union officials. With the growth of the municipalities involved, there are opportunities to equalize some benefits. The most difficult benefit to overcome will be pension benefit differences. Some departments have defined contribution and others have defined benefits.

The need for a central dispatch is evident. While most fire chiefs agree on this, many municipalities have difficulty with the concept because of the law enforcement aspect of dispatch. Many municipalities have combined fire and police dispatch, and use

their dispatchers for other duties such as clerical and jailers. Other municipalities use the Sheriff for police protection and have no dispatch center. Many of those departments are using a third party for dispatching fire. There are no less than four frequencies used for fire dispatch in the county. This should be remedied before any regionalized service can be adopted.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Considering the financial condition of many of the communities in Washtenaw County, development of a plan to consider regionalized or consolidated fire service makes sense. The sub-committee established by the Washtenaw Metro Alliance, should be commissioned to move ahead with developing a plan for this.

The plan should consider future growth in the county and what changes in fire protection service will be necessary. A complete inventory of each department should be undertaken. The inventory should include equipment, staffing methods, labor contracts, taxing methods and amounts, and any other pertinent information that may affect service to a particular community.

Once the information is collected, the plan should be presented to elected officials, fire department personnel, and citizens from each community. Buy in to the plan and understanding of what is being proposed is paramount to its success. They should be presented with information on the increased or decreased level of service that can be expected. It may be beneficial to get some prior input from the public on their expected level of service.

The Washtenaw Area Mutual Aid Association should push to establish a central dispatch center. Without it, regionalization is not possible. However, this may be

considered as part of the plan to regionalize. At the least, a common radio frequency must be established.

Establishment of a fire authority may be the best method to fair and equitable payment for fire services. The fire authority would have its own taxing ability, allowing each community involved to pay its fair share. It would also address some of the control issues that are apparent.

No matter what is considered, with communities facing economically difficult times, it is imperative for them to consider any option that may improve service or reduce costs. Regionalized or consolidated fire departments are one of those options.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Cover Letter for Survey**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Enclosed is a survey on fire department regionalization. As Fire Chief in Ypsilanti Township, I am completing the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. As part of that process, I am required to complete an Applied Research Paper on a topic of benefit to my department. This survey is a portion of my research for that paper.

The survey covers questions that I believe would be important to answer, if we are to consider regionalized fire service in the area. Please complete the survey and return it to me in the enclosed envelop. If you feel that it would be beneficial to have other Township Officials complete the survey, please feel free to copy it and give it to them.

If you have any questions, please contact me at 734-544-4100 or 734-368-5342.

Thank you for taking the time to complete the survey.

Sincerely,

Larry Morabito  
Fire Chief

## Appendix B

## Survey

Please check the title that best suits your position. (This is for statistical purposes only)

\_\_\_\_ Elected Official      \_\_\_\_ Fire Chief or Officer      \_\_\_\_ Union Official

1. Please define the term “regionalized fire service” as it applies to provision of fire department services.

[illegible]

2. Do you think there is a difference between “regionalization” and “consolidation” of fire services? If so, what are the differences?

[illegible]

3. What do you feel are the obstacles, if any to providing either regionalized or consolidated fire services in the area?

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[illegible]

4. What do you think is the first obstacle to overcome in either regionalization or consolidation of fire services in this area?

[illegible]

5. What do you think will be the most difficult obstacle to overcome? Why?

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6. Do you believe that some services could be consolidated or regionalized, while others remain as they currently are? Which services? Why those services?

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7. What do you think would be the logical steps to take to regionalize/consolidate fire services in the area?

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8. Any additional comments:

[illegible]

Please return in the enclosed envelop no later than October 15<sup>th</sup>.

Thank you for your time.

May I call you with follow up questions? Yes ☐ No ☐

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Survey Results

Respondents:

3 Elected Official

3 Fire Chief or Officer

2 Union Official

1. Please define the term “regionalized fire service” as it applies to provision of fire department services.

Elected officials:

- A single fire department serving several jurisdictions, with central command and central dispatch.
- A joint operating agreement among several jurisdictions agreeing to locate facilities and respond to calls in a pre-determined manner that does not follow political jurisdictional lines.
- Regionalized fire service is placing specific resources in areas where they are likely to be most effectively utilized, yet available to the remainder of the district or entity served. It could be many districts under one command officer system.

Fire Officials:

- A group of fire departments within close proximity to each other that could benefit from sharing resources and working more closely.
- Regionalized fire service to me applies to a county wide fire department. The borders being the county lines not to include area outside of Washtenaw County unless contracted. Contracted areas would have to pay for the services offered; they would not have a position on any board or committee that regulated the fire

departments actions. Contracted areas would also have to pay a standard or taxed fee, not a per incident fee.

- Reduction in costs; improve fire safety; less duplication of resources; central dispatching; interoperable radio, SCBA, etc.

#### Union Officials

- The creation of a countywide fire department or other geographical area rather than each city having their own departments.
- Combining of departments, equipment and manpower into an area department for better coverage, response, and dispatch.

2. Do you think there is a difference between “regionalization” and “consolidation” of fire services? If so, what are the differences?

#### Elected Officials:

- There might be. Consolidation clearly indicates a single capital purchasing place, a single command structure, a single dispatch, and a single tax rate. A regionalized force may be little more than the mutual benefit agreements already in place.
- Consolidation of fire services means moving services to a centralized location. Placing equipment in geographical areas to best serve the entire area with one command structure. Regionalization is more of a strategic process, division of command structure dictated by the specific incident.
- As I see it, the regionalization of response is pooling of individual resources; consolidation is the absorption of several departments by another or reorganization of two or more into a new district.

#### Fire Chiefs:

- Yes. It's one thing for a group of departments to train and set up AMA agreements to better serve those jurisdictions versus combining financial resources, staffing and rolling stock to expand the operations and coverage of a given area.
- Yes. As previously stated, regionalized to me is county wide. Consolidation is a smaller geographic area. Example would be Ypsilanti City and Ypsilanti Township or the western half of Washtenaw County.
- Regionalization could be closest car concept. Consolidation could be combining of departments. A clear definition would be needed to start such a project.
- I see regionalization as working together, more planning between departments; "team"; central administration. Consolidation – bring groups together under "one roof".

#### Union Officials

- They are similar but consolidation is combining of two or more city departments in on to reduce duplication of administration and to reduce the number of firefighters needed to cover. Regionalization is combining of many departments in a county in order to provide more consistency of service throughout the area.
3. What do you feel are the obstacles, if any to providing either regionalized or consolidated fire services in the area?

#### Elected Officials:

- An in equity in levels of support/staffing among the several jurisdictions in firefighting. Different visions for the degree of importance that medical runs have

as a fire department function. Differences in the levels of equipment among fire fighters in the several jurisdictions. Disagreements about who should lead the consolidated or regionalized force.

- The obstacles are the same and at the same time classic – turf, power, politics, control, and finances all come into play in either situation. Consolidation is much harder because someone will have to give up one of the items listed above. Regionalization, while still difficult, you can provide some degree of division of the obstacles.

#### Fire Chiefs:

- The benefit to the individual departments involved. One may be a candidate due to budget cuts but another many only be a candidate based on their close proximity to the others and have no real benefit to regionalizing or consolidation. Politics is always an issue too.
- The list is long, I am sure the following will only be scratching the surface. Cost equalization, politician told they will no have total control, union contracts, decreased services to outlying areas, and personnel conflicts.
- #1 Must have a central dispatch for all. #2 Similar departments come easier that dissimilar. #3 Union Contracts
- Union contracts, turf battles, politics, organizational differences, dispatch, different radio systems, non-standard equipment, training, and command and administration differences.

#### Union Officials

- Difference in retirement plans; difference in pay rates; fear of equipment being relocated; differences in operations, training and culture; fear of loss of jobs for firefighters; city loses control of fire department budgeting; seniority issues for promotions and shift bidding; scheduling changes; staffing levels on rigs; training differences between departments.

4. What do you think is the first obstacle to overcome in either regionalization or consolidation of fire services in this area?

Elected Officials:

- Reaching consensus on a single vision for a consolidated/regionalized force.  
Getting a true central dispatch.

Fire Chiefs:

- Interoperability with radio system and one central dispatch center.
- Politicians span of control: If I inform my Board of Trustees they will no longer enjoy complete control of the way the money is spent they would be opposed.
- Central dispatch.
- Dispatch, radios, egos.

Union Officials

- Pay and retirement issues; wage differentials; incorporating volunteers into fulltime departments; level of cost between cities; defined benefit versus defined contribution plans.

5. What do you think will be the most difficult obstacle to overcome? Why?

Elected Officials:

- If it is to be a county-wide fire force, the degree of funding/taxation to be levied against residents in the consolidated/regionalized jurisdiction. Because there is already a significant variation in support. If it is to be a consolidated force who will direct it. Because many of us would favor our own chiefs. If a regionalized force the difference in union wages and benefits throughout the county.

#### Fire Chiefs:

- Central dispatch. Politics, cost, egos, and department with centers now and are not willing to give them up.
- The large tax increase some area would have to pay. Some of the area departments are paid-on-call or combination, with small budgets. Regionalization would require career personnel at all stations.
- Central dispatch and union contracts
- Unions and politics

#### Union Officials

- Getting labor to buy into the change. It will be hard to overcome the attitude of labor when one group feels they are getting screwed. Seniority issues blending shifts, station assignments, vacations, etc.
6. Do you believe that some services could be consolidated or regionalized, while others remain as they currently are? Which services? Why those services?

#### Elected Officials:

- Central dispatch is essential. There should only be on dispatch for the entire county.

#### Fire Chiefs:

- Haz Mat and Tech rescue teams. Less impact on department with dollars for equipment and personnel costs. Those incidents do not occur as often so departments don't spend money to equip and train.
- Specialized low response services have been and I believe will remain to be able to be consolidated (hazardous materials response, technical rescue). These services should over time become self funding. This allows the teams to respond while the individual departments are not burdened with large expenses that can accompany such an operation.
- Smaller self-sufficient departments would be first. Larger departments may be hoping for others to bail them out of department. This won't happen.
- Not until obstacles are overcome.

#### Union Officials

- Yes special operations (hazmat, water rescue, rope rescue) all can be regionalized. Keeps cost low for each department, making the special operations available to the region. Firefighter could volunteer to join the team, but would remain a member of their own department.

7. What do you think would be the logical steps to take to regionalize/consolidate fire services in the area?

#### Elected Officials

- Form a committee of those that may be impacted by the plan. 2. Analysis of past calls, projected growth (residential and commercial), current locations of station, prepare a five year plan, and develop the proposal. 3. Proposal should include: division of power, command structure, financials, material and resources,

reporting structure. (Be prepared to answer objections prior to presentation because they will focus on the classic objections)

Fire Chiefs:

- Buy in from political players, show it in improved service to a given jurisdiction participating. Up grade radio system, set up central dispatch center.
- This is a hard question for me to answer because I do not believe regionalized. Consolidation would work at this time. Taking into consideration the turmoil with the Washtenaw County Sheriff Department. The elected officials would not be willing to lose control of another are of their public safety responsibility. They would project cost increases with limited means of control.
- Study by departments, dispatch/communications, and similar type departments.
- Getting everyone to believe in concept, political obstacles are out of the way.

Union Officials

- Include labor in all discussions regarding the consolidation/regionalization. Develop the plan that would include all issues both pro and con, and a way to deal with them. Setup time line to implement that allows for feedback. Present to all fire department members and take the time needed to address feedback. Present to city leaders.

8. Any additional comments:

Elected Officials

Fire Chiefs

Union Officials

**Note: All respondents did not answer all questions.**